

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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YELLOW-SHOULDERED BLACKBIRD LISTED AS AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

The yellow-shouldered blackbird (Agelaius xanthomus) of Puerto Rico has been determined to be an endangered species by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The rulemaking, published November 18, 1976, in the Federal Register also listed areas determined to be critical habitat for this bird.

A thorough review of all of the information available has indicated that the bird has gone into a perilous decline in recent years because of the invasion of its native habitat, coastal mangroves, by exotic predators and diseases.

The natural integrity of this mangrove ecosystem is also being rapidly altered or destroyed through development.

Prior to the 1940's, the yellow-shouldered blackbird, a close relative of the common red-winged blackbird of the United States, was abundant throughout the lowland areas of Puerto Rico. Then the shiny cowbird (Molothrus bonariensis) invaded Puerto Rico from other Antillean Islands to the southeast in 1955. This nest parasite lays its eggs in the nests of other birds, significantly lowering nesting success of the host species. The yellow-shouldered blackbird has been especially hard hit by this parasitism, which has cut its nesting success in half.

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Some biologists have expressed fears that the shiny cowbird may eventually reach the Southern United States, where it may create similar problems for other American birds.

Three non-native nest predators, the black rat, the Norway rat, and the mongoose, destroy yellow-shouldered blackbird nests. As a result the blackbirds now nest primarily on sheltered sites such as small mangrove islands and cactus or palm leaves.

Fowl pox, a disease transmitted by mosquitos, currently infects about 19 percent of the adult population.

In southwest Puerto Rico, the site of the major blackbird population, the annual adult mortality rate is about 31 percent. Annual production of adults, on the other hand, is only about 10 percent, largely due to loss of eggs and young to nest parasites and predators. Continued imbalance between death of adults and production of replacements is a recipe for extirpation of the bird in this area within 5 years, Fish and Wildlife Service biologists say.

The use of broad spectrum rat poisons, such as alpha-chloralose, placed around monkey feeders on two monkey islands in southwest Puerto Rico has also resulted in the death of some yellow-shouldered blackbirds which fed on the poison baits.

The following four areas are critical habitats for the yellow-shouldered blackbird, which means that all Federal agencies must ensure that their actions do not interfere with the needs of this bird: all of Mona Island, the southwestern coast from Cabo Rojo to Guanica, a one-mile circle around the town of San German in the southwestern portion of the island, and Roosevelt Roads Naval Station at the eastern end of the island.